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## REPORT SUMMARY

### Introduction/Background

This County Trail System Assessment is intended to provide a full and fair discussion addressing trail needs, planning opportunities, funding, implementation methods, and potential management structure. The collective purpose of this assessment is to help direct the County's trail implementation efforts as the County develops the General Plan 2020 update. The culmination of this effort is intended to establish a framework to address trail planning for the next 20 years and incorporate a balanced regard for trail needs of the general public with the ability to improve and provide an expanded trail system in the County of San Diego.



Pacific Crest Trail at Lake Morena Regional Park.

In the fall of 2000 the Board of Supervisors affirmed that “recreational trails are a legitimate form of public recreation the County should provide.” This decision was the first step of a three-step decision-making process and initiated development of a Trails Strategic Plan. The second step involves development of information and data specific to San Diego County, and the identification of Trail Program options for the Board's consideration. The Trail System Assessment is a major component of this second step. This County Trail System Assessment will identify the needs of trail users, opportunities and constraints associated with trail implementation, funding issues, and will produce trail system options. The third and final step will involve modifications to the goals and policies of the General Plan and development of implementation criteria based on direction received from the Board. The planning and implementation documents as well as management structure that ultimately results from this process will provide long-term planning guidance and establish programmatic resources.

This Trail System Assessment will be used in conjunction with other relevant materials as a basis to plan actions and make decisions regarding future trails. To realize the County's vision of providing an effective network of trails that connects the county's regional open space resources, connects county parks to county parks, and encourages residents from the entire county to enjoy the trail system, this Trail System Assessment identified the need and desire for regional and community trails. With the intent to accommodate the increasing need for trail opportunities in a



Single-track trail at Hellhole Canyon Open Space Preserve.

rapidly growing population, this report's recommendations clearly recognize that a revised plan for trails must be set in motion in order for the County to provide adequate service to its residents.

The intent of this Trail System Assessment is to provide guidance to the County as it incrementally implements a Trail Strategic Plan while adhering to these four basic considerations:

- identify, implement, and maintain a realistic and achievable trail system that effectively meets the needs of county residents and consists of both regional and community trails;
  - respect private property rights, balance restrictions associated with various land uses, and consider environmental constraints throughout the process, including when detail planning and design of trails is initiated;
- adopt an implementation model that will lead to an effective Trail Program; and
  - provide a responsible trail management structure that will insure long-term success of the trail system.

By addressing these considerations while implementing the Trail Strategic Plan, the County will, over time, build an effective system of trails that gains momentum as it grows.

## **Project Approach**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Chapter 1.0 of the Trail System Assessment, the *Introduction*, is intended to provide an overview of the existing trail opportunities in San Diego County as well as a preliminary discussion of the anticipated need for trails in the future. The history of trail planning in the county is also described, followed by the process and methodology of this current Trail System Assessment. Important definitions to understand as a basis for this assessment are also provided.

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## PUBLIC NEEDS ASSESSMENT

Chapter 2.0 of the Trail System Assessment, the *Public Needs Assessment*, is intended to provide a fundamental understanding of the need for trails in the county. This was done by first assessing the current level of service being provided by the existing trail system, and comparing it to the future level of demand for trails.

The Needs Assessment included trail use surveys specific to the County of San Diego in addition to review of State and National surveys. Three distinctively different methods were used to gather information about current trail use: Phone Surveys, Trail Organization Surveys, and Field Surveys. The surveys were completed within a limited time frame (December 2000 to January 2001) in order to incorporate the findings into this Trail System Assessment. The aim is for this document to be reviewed by the Board in time to influence and/or provide a basis for General Plan policy recommendations relating to trails in the county. Therefore, it is the General Plan 2020 update process that is the primary impetus of the assessment timeline.

The trail use surveys were conducted to identify user characteristics in terms of trail use purpose, frequency, time spent traveling to trails, and willingness to utilize County taxpayer funds and/or the County's general fund for trail construction, maintenance, and/or improvements. The general conclusions drawn from the surveys were:

- many residents desire long-distance trails and trails that are easily accessible;
- there is a need for local/community trails that are in close proximity to the population base and will receive more frequent use than outlying trails; and
- a range of experiences provided by a variety of trail locations and lengths should continue to be provided and expanded.



Nature trail at Felicita Regional Park.



Multi-use trail at Cuyamaca Rancho State Park.

While in most cases the surveys indicated that trail users are currently satisfied with the trails they use in the county, this is not an indication that there will not be a need for additional trails in the future. This is particularly true for the Community Plan areas that are in the County of San Diego's more urban areas. In fact as the population for the county grows the anticipated need for additional trails in the future will undoubtedly increase. Based on the above conclusions the County should continue to provide and expand both regional and community trails in order to balance the varying needs of residents. Connecting future trails to the existing trails around the county will help form long distance trail opportunities and should be a priority for the County. This will in turn increase the possibility for a quality trail system and a wider range of trail experiences.

Extensive use of the existing trail system will need to be dispersed among more trails in the future in order for trails to continue to provide the quality experience most users seek. In addition, trails that are more readily accessible and have greater opportunity for long-distance connections will likely experience increased demand as the population continues to grow.

The surveys conducted are a starting point for assessing the needs of the residents and should be continued in the future as a source of user input for the County. The County should implement a periodic update of the surveys that considers parameters such as time of year and demographics of respondents.

In addition to the trail use surveys conducted, the County's Community Planning/Sponsor Groups were sent letters asking a series of questions regarding their interest in trails. Those groups that showed interest in trails were sent a subsequent letter soliciting their preparation of preliminary trail maps. The maps were to indicate the preferred location and quantity of trails, which leads to an understanding of the general level of trail interest among the Community Planning/Sponsor Groups that could be included in the Trail Needs Assessment. Groups were asked to develop two types of maps: one map that only included public lands and public road



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rights-of-way, and the other (if desired) showing potential trail locations on both public and private lands.

In general there was a broad level of participation and support for trails expressed by the Community Planning/Sponsor Groups. Of the 26 Community Planning/Sponsor Groups surveyed, 22 indicated at least some level of interest in local trails. The expectations of the Community Planning/Sponsor Groups were varied but responses received from a majority of the groups confirm a need for trails. The submitted maps also indicate a desire to maintain or expand trails within their communities. Many maps include extensive local trail networks, which confirms the need to provide additional community trails.



Equestrians using pathway along Gunn Stage Road, near Mount Gower Open Space Preserve.

General benefits of trails from various studies and articles that were considered relevant to the County of San Diego were also summarized. Once the need and benefit of trails were established, recommended definitions of trail types, including general recommendations for future design guidelines, were developed. A discussion of other jurisdictions' Trail Programs was also included in the remaining sections of the Needs Assessment.

The synthesis of this information leads to recommendations for Trail Program future goals and policy implementation. These goals and policies should address long-term programmatic needs and provide support for a countywide trail strategy. Among these recommendations is the establishment of a Trail Master Plan, preferably within the General Plan; the implementation of trails that reflect the current and future population patterns; the periodic updating of community surveys to accommodate any adjustments to local trail needs; and clearly defining trail types and providing adequate support facilities that will sustain existing and future trails.

## OPPORTUNITIES AND CONSTRAINTS ANALYSIS

Chapter 3.0 of the Trail System Assessment, *Opportunities and Constraints Analysis*, is intended to identify, determine, and analyze opportunities and constraints that might affect the implementation of future trails within the county. This discussion includes how they may relate to land ownership, land use, transportation, and environmental and cultural resources. This



Multi-use trail at Lake Morena Regional Park.

chapter also includes acquisition options and methodologies for acquiring access across private lands as well as analyzing nexus issues and possible enforcement issues.

Three (3) types of land ownership that affect the opportunities and constraints related to trail implementation were analyzed and how each would affect the implementation of future trails. They include private lands, public lands, and semi-public lands.

It was concluded that a Countywide Trail Plan that identifies routes across or adjacent to private lands must address the cost, land use, privacy, liability, and the “due process” issues that concern many San Diego County landowners. If the opportunity for acquiring private lands for trail easements were

eliminated, the available options for implementing a Trail Plan would be extremely limited and implementing an effective trail system within the county would be difficult.

It should also be noted that as private development continues to occur in the county it is important that the County prepare a Trail Master Plan to provide a mechanism aimed at preventing the elimination of future trail opportunities. With an ineffective Trail Plan the opportunities for trail implementation may become increasingly limited. As critical properties go forward for development or are under consideration for land conservation programs, the inability to acquire trails for lack of a long-term plan and program makes the establishment of a cohesive trail system less likely to occur.

Most public land owning agencies have management policies that provide mechanisms for approving interjurisdictional trail connections to their existing trails. The County should make every effort to coordinate with these public agencies on future trail locations and to interconnect planned trails with public facilities such as schools and community centers. Providing trail connections to these existing facilities would benefit any trail system proposed by the County.

Most semi-public lands have no specific policies that are directed toward trails. Any discussion regarding trail access or easement would require direct contact on a case-by-case basis with the specific parties.

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Land use issues were analyzed based on recreational uses, educational institutions, residential uses, military installations, and industrial uses. Each area was analyzed by reviewing current plans and policies and determining the consistency of future trail implementation with these plans and policies.

San Diego is one of the largest agricultural producers in the nation and in the State of California. The agricultural community is a unique part of San Diego and should be a major partner when considering general trail alignments in agricultural areas. Possible land use incompatibilities could occur when trails are located adjacent to agricultural lands. However, in many cases it is possible to address these concerns so that trails and agricultural uses can co-exist. If a planned trail alignment is a critical link in the overall regional or subregional system, then establishing the trail in a location that would have the least impact should be identified. In all cases every effort should be made to involve the agricultural community in locating trails and in defining trail design, and management practice.

Numerous environmental issues were considered when addressing trail location and implementation. This section gives an overview of the requirements under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) for the primary environmental issues that could impact or constrain trail alignments and configurations, as future trail studies are prepared. Possible permits and mitigation measures needed during the implementation of the trail system are also addressed, and a table defining the permits or actions potentially required is also provided. Based on these analyses an environmental approach and process summary is provided as well.



Hiking trail at Anza-Borrego State Park.

Chapter 3 includes a comparison of other counties and municipalities regarding trails. In addition, there is discussion of nexus and proportionality issues as they relate to exactions and trail development. Then enforcement and management issues associated with trail system implementation are explored. This section is intended to establish the areas of enforcement and subsequent management issues for the County. The section provides a better understanding of what can be expected for future maintenance, management policies, and also the related cost for a trail system.

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The information provided in Chapter 3 leads to recommendations for future Trail Program goals and policy implementation. The primary recommendations include:

- using lands already in public ownership is preferred;
- providing trails that meet public needs while respecting rights of property owners;
- locating trails in areas that highlight recreational and educational experiences;
- providing continued involvement and input of the agricultural community to help identify trail opportunities within agricultural areas and the establishment of guidelines for trails within agricultural lands;
- establishing trails in areas that do not impact environmental resources; and
- establishing a management plan that outlines the rules and regulations for the Trail Program.



Hiking trail at Felicita Regional Park.

Many acquisition options have been identified and it is recommended that the County consider all these options and utilize as many as possible to ensure success of the trail system. It is also recommended that the County establish appropriate nexus and proportionality findings to support mandatory dedication of land for trail easements.

## FINANCIAL CONSIDERATIONS

Chapter 4.0 of the Trail System Assessment, *Financial Considerations*, is intended to outline several key issues that deal with the cost of trail implementation, funding sources, financial methods and possible incentives for future trail dedication.

There are many potential funding sources for trail acquisition, construction, and maintenance. Those with the greatest trail-funding potential are generally associated with parkland acquisition, access and preservation, habitat conservation and access, and recreational opportunities and access on public lands. The information provided in this chapter includes current state and federal funding sources.



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The information in Chapter 4.0 is organized into funding sources with moderate to high potential for trail funding as well as sources with lower potential for trail funding. There are also a number of other potential funding sources that are listed from high to low potential. A detailed description of each source is included.

Funding sources with moderate to high potential are noted below. In parenthesis is the Jurisdiction responsible for the funding source:

- Non-Motorized Trails Grant Program (State)
- Recreational Trails Program (State)
- Per Capita I Program (State)
- Land and Water Conservation Fund (State/Federal)
- Surplus Real Estate Program (Federal)
- Habitat Conservation Fund (State)
- Riparian and Riverine Habitats Grant Program (State)
- Environmental Enhancement and Mitigation Program (State)
- ISTE National Recreational Trails Fund Act (State/Federal)
- Urban Corps of San Diego (Private Organizations)
- California Conservation Corps (State)

Potential new funding sources for trails with high funding potential:

- County of San Diego General Fund (County)
- Use fees (County)
- Park Land Dedication Ordinance (PLDO) Fund (County)
- Park Land Dedication Credit (County)
- County Service Area (CSA) (County)
- Developer Fees and Benefit Assessment Districts (County)
- “Adopt a Trail” Program (County Initiated)
- Corporate Funding (Various)
- Excise Taxes on Recreational Equipment (State)

Some of the funding sources discussed above require modifications and/or clarification of existing ordinances and/or policies. Others require submitting grant applications to federal and/or state agencies. In general, the County will be competing with other agencies for use of these grant funds and the fund amounts may be limited. Since grants are typically a competitive process it is recommended that the County identify stable and consistent funding sources.

The funding sources that are primarily for transportation-related projects will generally not be applicable to the average trail project. However, these sources should not be ignored as many of



Multi-use trail at Cuyamaca State Park.

them could provide ancillary funding for trail projects that may be in close proximity to roadways and/or have a link to the local or regional transportation network. Transportation funds can clearly be used for the implementation of pathways – a term used for trails located with road rights-of-way. In summary, all funding sources should be considered.

Based on the information collected, several recommendations have been identified to obtain the funding necessary for trail acquisition, construction, and maintenance of a

County Trail Program. The primary recommendations include:

- establishment of a prioritized list of trail implementation based on needs and costs;
- continuation of required mandatory dedication for trails;
- evaluation of existing County funding mechanisms and budgets for trails;
- establishment of a variety of funding sources for trail acquisition, implementation, and maintenance;
- consideration of amending the current PLDO to allow developers to receive credits for trail dedication;
- initiation of a discussion for the development of “Adopt a Trail”; and
- establishment of an active grant application effort as part of the County Trail Program.

### STRATEGIC TRAIL SYSTEM CONCEPTS

The final chapter of the Trail System Assessment is the development of specific strategic Trail System Concepts. In establishing a Trail System Concept that best meets the challenges and issues that could confront a Trail Program, the Board will need to balance the overall needs for a successful County Trail System with specific issues relating to trail implementation. Two Trail System Concepts have been prepared. Each concept will provide a slightly different means of achieving the overall recommendations related to needs, opportunities and constraints, and

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financial considerations identified earlier in the report. Chapter 5.0 provides an overview of the two Trail System Concepts that include the following:

\$ Concept 1: New County Trail Program/Policy – Trails on Public and Private Land  
Proposes preparing a new program and subsequent policies for the General Plan while utilizing public and private lands for future trail implementation.

\$ Concept 2: New County Trail Program/Policy – Trails on Public Lands Only  
Proposes preparing a new program and subsequent policies for the General Plan while utilizing only public lands for future trail implementation.

In addition to the two (2) Trail System Concepts, three (3) Program Implementation Models are outlined and two (2) Management Structure Models are explained. The implementation models identify different approaches the County could take regarding how trails could be addressed within the General Plan or possibly in other plans and documents outside of the General Plan. Management structure models indicate two approaches the County could take regarding which department(s) would be responsible for trail and pathway planning and implementation once the Trail Program is initiated.



Pacific Crest trail near Lake Morena Regional Park.

The premise is that whichever Trail System Concept the Board selects, an implementation model and management structure should also be selected to develop in conjunction with the Trail System Concept. The integration of these three elements will lead to a successful long-term Trail Program.

The two Trail System Concepts are explained in detail in this chapter. Each concept establishes the strategies that should be used to see the successful implementation for that particular concept. These strategies are then expanded with a list of recommendations to support each of the proposed strategies. Additionally, each concept is analyzed with respect to how well it provides for regional needs, community needs and addresses public opinion. The environmental and financial approaches, which identify related cost, are also outlined for each concept.

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Chapter 5.0 concludes that Concept 1 (New County Trail Program/Policy – Trails on Public and Private Land) would have the best opportunity of providing a long-term successful Trail Program. It is critical that trails on both public and private lands be allowed as in some cases important regional and community trail links will necessarily cross through private lands. In this concept, based upon the current findings of the Trail System Assessment, four (4) strategies with specific recommendations would be used to carry-out or implement the general goals and policies of the General Plan 2020 update. These general strategies include:

- preparing a Trail Plan;
- establishing trails sensitive to land uses and environmental concerns
- \$ implementing the Trail Program; and
- \$ effectively maintaining and operating the Trail Program.

Of the Program Implementation Models presented, Model 1 is recommended and would include general objectives and policies, a Regional Trail Plan, and trail design guidelines within the General Plan. This method of implementation gives the greatest strength to the Regional Trails and makes it easier to enforce the design guidelines and to secure the necessary Regional Trail links. A Community Trail Master Plan would be implemented as well but would remain outside of the General Plan for ease in modifying and updating individual Community Planning/Sponsor Group trail maps.

Management Structure Model 1 is also recommended as it provides the most effective way to manage trails by keeping trail planning, operations, and acquisition within the Park and Recreation Department. It is also recommended that the management structure occur in stages with trails initially being addressed within the open space management business unit and eventually becoming its own business unit as the Trail Program gains strength and momentum.

This combination of trail management, implementation, and overall Trail System Concept would lead to the most effective County Trail System. It is critical that the County make a commitment to a trail system strategy at this time so that the General Plan 2020 update can reflect the current thinking and the County's vision for the future of trails. The County of San Diego has a great asset in its existing trail system and must make the expansion and improvement of that system a priority for providing a recreational resource to its residents.